

## CONSUMER ALERT MEDIA ADVISORY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Cosmetic Contacts Can Make Halloween REALLY Frightening** *State officials warn consumers about risks from improper use of decorative contact lenses*

**RICHMOND** – As the Halloween season approaches, state officials are warning consumers to beware of decorative contact lenses distributed without a prescription or without proper fitting by a licensed eye care professional.

Decorative or cosmetic lenses come in an array of colors and designs – named “Alien,” “Cat Eye,” and “Zebra,” for example\* – and are intended to alter the appearance of the eye, not to improve vision. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, illegal sales of such lenses have been reported at flea markets, convenience stores, costume shops, and various retail locations.

Serious health risks, including permanent eye damage and even blindness, may result if contact lenses are dispensed without the prescription and supervision of a licensed eye care professional. The lenses are considered medical devices and, if distributed improperly or without professional fitting, can lead to corneal abrasions or ulcers, conjunctivitis, allergic reaction, and vision-threatening ocular infection. In extreme cases, uncontrolled infection and corneal scarring may result in blindness and eye loss.

“Because they don’t correct vision, many consumers mistakenly think these cosmetic lenses are just harmless fun,” said Elizabeth Carter, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Virginia Board for Optometry. “But without a valid prescription from an eye doctor, either an ophthalmologist or an optometrist, you’re endangering your health.”

“Even if the lenses feel comfortable, they may be rubbing or pressing too firmly on the cornea without your noticing,” said Mary Broz, a spokesperson for the Virginia Board for Opticians. “There are so many ways that poorly fit lenses can hurt you, so it’s important to rely on a licensed optician or eye doctor.”

While decorative lenses can be especially popular as Halloween costume accessories, the risks remain with everyday use. Sharing or trading lenses, which has become popular among young people, is dangerous because used lenses are bathed in tears that may contain infectious or contagious agents.

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\*See [www.wildcontacts.com](http://www.wildcontacts.com).

“Swapping lenses with your best friend, maybe because hers match your sweater, is a good way to catch a bacterial infection,” Broz warns.

- Consumers may report complaints about decorative contact lenses to MedWatch, the FDA’s voluntary reporting program – (800) FDA-1088.

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### **What’s the Difference? Optician vs. Optometrist vs. Ophthalmologist**

A consumer who needs contact lenses or glasses will visit an optician. An optician fills prescriptions for contact lenses and glasses written by eye doctors (either optometrists or ophthalmologists).

**Opticians** prepare and dispense eyeglasses, spectacles, and contact lenses as identified by the prescription. They use the prescription to reproduce eyewear for a consumer and adapt, fit, and adjust the eyewear to the human face. Only licensed opticians who successfully complete specific educational training and examination may fit consumers with contact lenses. Opticians are licensed by the Virginia Board for Opticians at the Department of Professional and Occupational Regulation.

**Optometrists** are medical professionals who perform examinations to treat any vision problems and detect signs of disease and abnormal conditions. They may test for glaucoma, color perception, depth, and the ability to focus and coordinate the eyes. They also may dispense prescriptive eyewear. Those with additional certification to use certain therapeutic medications may also treat some eye diseases and disorders. Optometrists must hold a Doctor of Optometry (O.D.) degree and be licensed by the Virginia Board of Optometry at the Department of Health Professions.

**Ophthalmologists** must be licensed by the Virginia Board of Medicine at the Department of Health Professions. They possess a broad knowledge of general medicine and clinical training which enables them to diagnose and treat all types of eye disorders. If a person requires medical or surgical care for an eye disease or an eye injury, he or she will seek the assistance of an ophthalmologist.

### **About DPOR**

The Virginia Department of Professional and Occupational Regulation (DPOR) administers and enforces laws regulating 31 commercial occupations and certain professions. The agency licenses or certifies more than 250,000 individuals and businesses ranging from architects and contractors to cosmetologists and professional wrestlers.

DPOR investigates reports of regulatory violations by licensees; pursues complaints of criminal activity by unlicensed practitioners; responds to business-related consumer inquiries and requests for license checks; administers recovery funds for consumers harmed in contractor or real estate transactions; and conducts mediation services and public awareness campaigns.

For more information, visit DPOR online at [www.dpor.state.va.us](http://www.dpor.state.va.us).

### **About DHP**

The Virginia Department of Health Professions (DHP) assures the safe and competent delivery of health care to citizens of the Commonwealth through regulation of approximately 270,000 licensees, comprised of 50 health professions and 15 types of facilities. With DHP administrative support, the thirteen health regulatory boards are responsible for licensing, disciplining, and promulgating regulations governing their respective licensees.

DHP receives and investigates allegations of unprofessional conduct, substandard care, and other violations pertaining to the practice of the professions and conducts inspections of regulated facilities. The toll-free complaint line for providing information about health care providers is 1-800-533-1560. DHP also provides a broad range of information concerning health profession regulation, including automated license verification, physician profiling, recent case decisions, and policy studies.

For more information, visit DHP online at [www.dhp.state.va.us](http://www.dhp.state.va.us).